

**My Experience With Privatized Housing at Fort Polk
Testimony of Private First Class Cody S. Calderon
for the House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Submitted March 29,2022**

My name is Cody Calderon, Private First Class in the United States Army. I am a 12B Combat Engineer. I PCS'd to Fort Polk in July 2021 and moved into Corvias managed housing in mid-August, unaccompanied by my wife. Shortly after my placement, my unit was domestically deployed to aid and assist in the clean-up efforts of Hurricane Ida in the Grand Isles region of Louisiana. We spent nearly a month clearing levees, sawing down trees, and witnessing the catastrophic damage to the community. Every single day, we would ride in a canvas-topped LMTV troop transporter, seeing the unfathomable damage a storm of that magnitude leaves in its wake. Houses were demolished. They floated down levees. 100-year-old trees snapped directly in half without being uprooted. Telephone and power poles dislodged and hung over heavily used roadways, many of which caused hazards for our convoy. On several instances, members of my company were struck in the head by tree limbs as we navigated down narrow county roads. We slept in tents outside of a community college for days until our command found us FEMA shelters sponsored by the parish Sheriff's Department. I saw children and animals sitting on their front porches with no home behind them, completely devastated. We felt their pain, strength, cries for help, and most of all, their gratitude for us being there. I've seen the damage that water can do to families and their homes. There is no feeling in the world like helping those in need. It was my honor and duty. It gave me an even greater appreciation for the housing that I just received on base. My unit returned from our deployment at the end of September. After a few weeks of logistical coordination, I was able to take leave to pick up my wife and dog in Arizona, bringing them back to Louisiana.

I am a 32-year-old PFC. If I joined at 18, I would be six years from retiring with full benefits as I sit here today. However, life had other plans for me when I was blessed by my partner and soul's counterpart, Alyssa. We rescued the most fantastic creature ever, who happens to be in the form of a dog named Leo, but we call him Bubba. He was displaced by Hurricane Harvey back in 2017 and found his way into our family shortly after while we were living in Austin, TX. Every animal I saw during Hurricane Ida relief reminded me of that beautiful boy and his mama waiting for me way out west, ready to move into our new home. My wife and I have struggled with housing for most of our relationship. We have been displaced and homeless on four separate occasions during the first three years of our marriage. The three of us lived in our van for months while I tried to find work and take care of my family. My wife struggled with medical issues that we fought to have diagnosed and traveled all over California, finding the right specialist and surgeon for her conditions. I worked at Amazon, U-Haul, several bars, a moving company and started my own custom carpentry business while either living out of a van or hotel room. Our feet kept getting swept out from under us no matter what we did.

After losing our apartment to an eviction caused by Covid, the repetitive trauma became too much for my family. It forced my wife to move back out west to Arizona with our dog Leo, leaving me to sleep in our van in hotel parking lots. I worked at Amazon driving delivery trucks

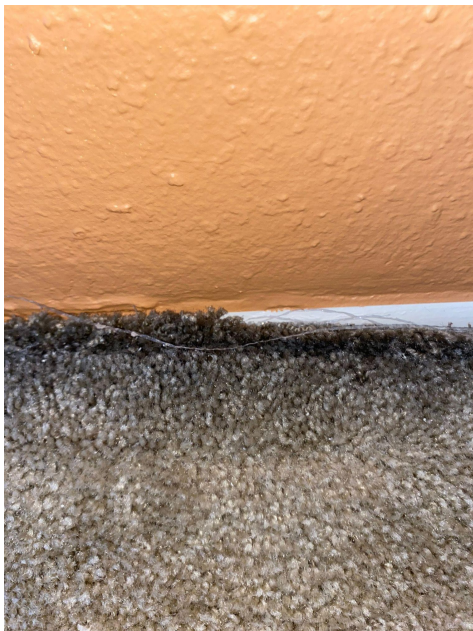
for 12 hours a day, slept behind the Holiday Inn down the street from the depot, and sent every paycheck to my wife minus gas and food money. She was very sick and unable to work at that time. One night, while moonlighting as a food delivery driver after my Amazon shift, I felt exhausted. I couldn't drive for another second and had to pull over. I saw what looked like a nice little monument park and stopped for a few minutes to breathe. I opened my eyes and stepped outside where a soldier's cross cast in bronze stood. Boots, rifles, and helmets cemented to the ground directly into my mind. I walked the memorial and scanned the etched marble insignias of each military branch on the monument floor. I felt compelled. I called my mom and asked her what she thought about me joining the Army, and she was just as worried as any mother would be. But she supported me, which felt great because I would join no matter what. I got on my phone to submit my info and received a call the next day from my recruiter. I researched, saw the medical benefits, housing, steady paycheck, and career opportunities, and thought, "this is how I get my family back." In February of 2021, I swore in at the military entrance processing station (MEPS) in Raleigh, NC.

I needed to live for something more, something outside of myself. I needed purpose and direction. I felt like the Army would provide my family and me with all of that. Alyssa was excited to embark on our new adventure together. Once she arrived, she voiced her concerns about the home feeling weird, but we attributed it to the new climate and allergens in the region. At this time, my wife was thriving health-wise. She was active, working out every day, vibrant, and full of life. She had a full-time online job and began taking the steps to finish her degree after a 3-year hiatus due to her medical conditions. We were so grateful to have our first home and convert the second bedroom into an office for my wife's work and school. However, shortly after moving in and getting settled, she started feeling off kilter. We both figured it was just Fort Polk and its lack of attractions, or even the transition to the Army way of life. We made every excuse possible, not wanting to believe that our house could be what was hurting us. After coming out of homelessness and feeling so much gratitude for our new life, the last thing we wanted to do was accept that possibility. Even the thought of the trauma of getting displaced again started causing us anxiety. A few months went by, and my wife progressively got more ill. By this point, it was physically apparent. Her eyes were sunken from lack of sleep; she walked hunched over from abdominal, back, and neck pain. She had uncontrollable vaginal bleeding, confusion, malaise, lack of balance, mood swings, trembling in her hands and neck, all while her cognitive abilities declined rapidly.

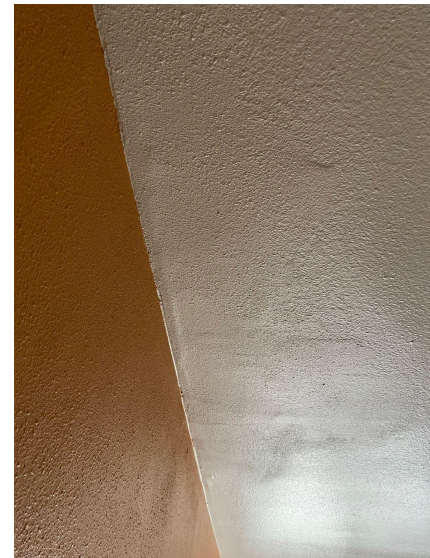
What's important to remember in these instances is that the service member in the household is at work. We wake up at 0500, drive to the formation by 0615, conduct physical training until 0800, go home to change, report back to work by 0930, take lunch from 1130 to 1300, then typically work until we are released around 16 or 1700. By that point, we've been gone for, on average, 10-12 hours per day, while our spouses are home full-time either working, taking care of children, pursuing their education, or all three. They are creating lives for

themselves that are equally as important as the service member's and show symptoms faster because of exposure for longer periods of time. We conduct yearly chemical attack training in my unit, and during that exercise, we are placed into a chamber with tear gas. We go in with our protective masks on, then while inside, we remove them and sing The Army Song while doing a few jumping jacks. The time ranges anywhere from 2 to 5 minutes. Ask any service member the contrast between being in that gas chamber unmasked for the first 2 seconds compared to 5 minutes later. It's remarkably different. The effects compound and become more pronounced. Our spouses are stuck in that proverbial gas chamber every single day for the majority of our terms of service. My wife desperately looked for answers and finally started seeing posts on the Facebook spouse pages about Corvias's mold issues in Maple Terrace. She started connecting the dots and realized that every symptom she had been experiencing correlated with what these other spouses were saying. The more she dug, the more she found—post after post, about Corvias and mold. When she discovered this, I was on a Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotation for the entire month of January 2022. During that time, Alyssa's mother drove from Arizona to stay at our home to help care for my wife. Shortly after my mother-in-law arrived, she began experiencing shortness of breath, coughing, chills, and nausea. As soon as she left, all her symptoms disappeared. My wife needed to be transported to the emergency room during that time due to very abnormal and uncontrollable vaginal bleeding. They gave her a pamphlet and sent her home. She was exhausted, sick, in terrible pain, and now being tossed into the trauma of another housing crisis, which could have easily been prevented.

I returned from JRTC in February and started diving into what was happening and why we were sick. Alyssa swore up and down it was mold, so I placed a work order through Corvias' portal. There is not a single option in their "Problems" dropdown that says "Mold or Mildew," so I had to select "Duct Cleaning" because I was sure it was blowing from our HVAC system into all areas of the home. Corvias sent a maintenance worker later that day while I was at work and greeted my wife with extreme unprofessionalism. He was rude, condescending, dismissive, and unconcerned with the issue. My wife told him to leave and that she did not want him there, especially not while I was at work. I was on the phone with her while she told him. When I got home later that evening, I called the work order hotline and asked to speak with a representative to report my wife's interaction and demand a new worker. They marked it in the system and sent two different men to the house the next day. I walked them through the home and showed them all areas of concern, including the HVAC, register vents, toilets, and carpet in the upstairs bedroom.



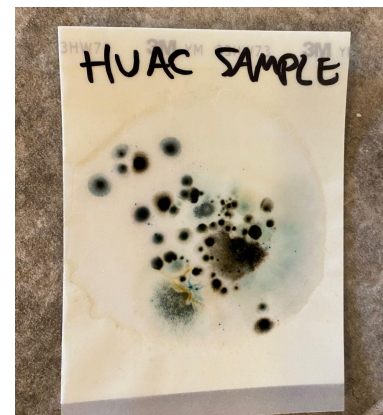
A black outline on the carpet edge was tucked under the baseboard that I discovered while routing an ethernet cable under the floor. I saw a poorly done plaster repair job on the ceiling. The maintenance worker told me that it was black "soot" that the carpet cleaner could not reach during turnover. I knew he was lying because not a single carpet in that home had been vacuumed, let alone steam cleaned. I spent an hour vacuuming those carpets after moving in, dumping tank after tank of dirt and sand in the trash. Why would the carpet under the wall, sheltered from foot traffic, need to be steam cleaned? Also, why is this black "soot" on the carpet directly below the ceiling with poorly-repaired, water-damaged drywall? I started feeling this was an even bigger issue than I initially thought. It finally dawned on me that they would never say the word "mold" and would never admit that mold was anywhere in the home. I let them do whatever they said needed to be done, including changing the register vent insulation, HVAC filter and replacing the brown stained caulking around the downstairs toilet that looked like sewage damage. I was told that they do not perform vent cleanings and that I would have to be referred out. I requested copies of all his notes and forms from that appointment and attached all photos to the work order. They attempted to repair numerous holes on the exterior of the house during that visit.



My wife ordered a mold testing kit the week prior, and after the men came to perform maintenance, I took it upon myself to collect samples from around the home to see if there was something more profound. The tests from different home



areas showed positive for active mold colonies. I showed Corvias those samples in hopes it would be sufficient for them to take appropriate action and hire certified remediators to diagnose and remove, if necessary. After waiting until the following week for the maintenance manager to do a walk-through with the property manager and me, they wanted to repair some drywall around the HVAC, replace the carpet upstairs, and check in a single stud bay for mold. They used the hole made to install the doorknob wall-protection plate to peek inside, but the problem being, that section between those studs was not even close to the water-damaged ceiling or black carpet.



The photos inside the wall showed nothing, but no qualified professional's diagnosis was performed nor offered. The common denominator with these maintenance issues is that no industry

standard is followed. Corvias can claim they follow U.S. Army Installation Management Command (IMCOM,) but never provide any transparency of the metrics they use to determine the size of the remediation area nor the qualifications of the persons performing the task. Those guidelines are more than just suggestions; they are implemented for the safety of both the workers and tenants. Skipping, modifying, or entirely disregarding any of the appropriate measures is unacceptable and unethical.

From March 7-11, I was in the field for a Team Live Fire Exercise. During that time, the conditions in that home made my wife and dog so sick that they stayed in a hotel off-base for the entire week. When I got back to Garrison that Friday, the 11th, I met the Corvias Property Manager and Maintenance Supervisor at the home with my Team Leader. I showed them my collected mold growth samples, the discolored carpet upstairs, and explained the adverse health effects that Alyssa and I had been experiencing. After expressing the severity of the situation, my wife and I were placed in a Corvias Hospitality Suite. After spending over \$500 on a hotel, we were willing to see if the hospitality suite was in better condition than our home. Alyssa and Leo began recovering while at the hotel, and I felt remarkably better sleeping in the field for that entire week.

Pursuant to our 12th Right in the Tenant Bill of Rights, which states that in the case of maintenance or repairs necessary to ensure habitability of a housing unit, we are entitled to prompt relocation into suitable lodging or other housing at no cost to the Tenant until the maintenance or repairs are completed, on March 11th, my family and I were moved in the first of two hospitality suites. During that time, we were initially told that no work would begin until an air quality test was ordered and performed by the military hospital, and that such a test would confirm any contaminants in the home, including mold. Shortly after, I was informed that the air test would not be waited for and that the maintenance team was ready to work. My locks were to be changed and neither my wife, nor myself, were permitted back into the home until work had been completed, contradictory to the initial expectations. We immediately felt ill again after going from the hotel to the first hospitality suite, and after the third night, requested to be moved again. While in the second suite, Corvias informed us that they would begin work on the 14th of March.

On the 16th of March, our work order was closed and marked as complete and we were told that they were ready for us to move back in. We declined, stating that we did not feel comfortable moving back until the air quality test was conducted and analyzed. Two days later, on the 18th, Garrison housing and the air quality personnel met me at the home to conduct testing. When I asked them about the specifics of what would be analyzed, they told me that they do not test for mold in homes as there is no federally accepted threshold for the minimum safe concentration. This information contradicted what I was told days before by Corvias and the

housing office. That same day, we were offered and shown a replacement home in the Palmetto neighborhood in South Fort. My wife and I diligently inspected the home and found unsafe and neglected conditions in multiple areas from mold under the carpet and baseboards, on the walls of the outside storage room, an active water leak in the HVAC utility closet, and unacceptable amounts of dust and debris all around. No standard was followed to ensure the habitability of the home.



On March 21st, my wife and I began working with Armed Forces Housing Advocates to help navigate the process that our Military Housing Office civilian advocate failed to. An email was drafted to inquire about the proper standards that were followed during our home's remediation, and to request the proper forms for the dispute resolution process. After 24 hours,

and no reply, a second email was sent along with a phone call to the military housing office advocate. When asked if she would please reply with the requested forms, my wife was told that she would “get to it when she had time,” and subsequently hung up the phone. The advocate that we have access to (per the 8th entry in the MPH Bill of Rights,) that would not reply to an email or send the requested form, is meant to be our voice in safe housing? The instability and trauma of this situation caused my wife to miss multiple deadlines for her course assignments and was ultimately dropped by her university, leaving us to foot the bill because financial aid had not yet cleared. In addition to that, any type of remote employment would not be possible due to the unpredictability of the internet connection in both the hospitality suites and the hotel. Corvias and Housing refused to allow Alyssa to handle any of this situation and would not return any of her email correspondence, leaving me, the service member, to continue work at my company, handle all appointments for housing, coordinate transportation with our shared vehicle, move from place to place, and prepare to deliver this testimony.

After reviewing the completed work order, there is clear evidence of mold on the building materials beneath the HVAC pedestal in our laundry room. During the remediation process, a proper containment area was not employed and no Institute of Inspection Cleaning and Restoration Certification (IICRC) standards were followed. By performing this remediation without certification, they contaminated the entire home even more than it was. There was no negative pressure environment and the materials were not properly removed, simply painted over and closed back up. From my understanding, if IMCOM standards by the IICRC are being followed, then a certified inspector would need to deem the residence safe for occupancy before the work order is closed and the family is told to move back in. If those steps were not followed, the order should have remained open until they were. By failing to follow the standards outlined in the Tenants Bill of Rights, and closing the work order to maximize their incentive fees, they have, in my eyes, committed work order fraud. More importantly, they could have put me and my family in even more danger than we already were.



On March 23rd, my wife and I were shown a potential replacement home in the Dogwood Neighborhood of South Fort. In attendance were Corvias Property Management and Maintenance, Military Housing Office civilian advocate and staff, company First Sergeant and Squad Leader, as well as Battalion Command Sergeant Major. I requested the 7-year work order history the night before the showing and found some concerning information. The home had been plagued with HVAC and plumbing issues all the way back from 2018. There were an average of 10 maintenance requests per year up until February of 2020. The last recorded turnover was in September of 2019, when shortly after, an emergency plumbing issue was reported. 10 days later, a routine order was logged that only states "Interior-Structural-Drywall." Since that date, there have only been "routine" and "preventative" work orders logged and not a single entry since January of 2022; no maintenance requests, no turnover. Moving forward to March 2022, I was shown this home and immediately opened the access panel under the HVAC to find significant water damage. We immediately declined the home and informed the Military Housing Office civilian that we wished to begin the dispute resolution process and to please supply the forms that we requested 48 hours prior. We were told that the forms are in our lease, so I got a printed copy, filled them out, and turned them in before the end of that business day. Another instance of our housing advocate not having our best interests in mind, nor any standards being implemented, nor followed, to make sure that homes offered to service members, and their families, are safe and habitable in accordance with IICRC.



The evening of March 23rd, after declining the Dogwood home and submitting the dispute resolution forms, my wife and I were tired of feeling sick and being poisoned by yet another hospitality suite with predictably bad internet, and decided to go back to the hotel. After packing everything and cleaning the space we got settled in the hotel and began following up with emails. I sent correspondence to the Corvias Property Manager inquiring about our Schedule 4 rights written in our lease that state we are entitled to a per diem rate, per person, while displaced. I received an email reply the following afternoon and scheduled a time on Friday, March 25th to meet in person at the community center to go over my options. I informed both Corvias staff and the Military Housing Office civilian that I would have my Armed Forces

Housing Advocate on the phone for the duration of the meeting. They offered me per diem compensation from March 11-15th. These dates do not even take into account March 16th when they declared the work complete and closed the order. I refused to sign and inquired about which standards were used to remediate the mold. The 8th item in the Bill of Right states that tenants have the right to receive property management services provided by a landlord that meet or exceed industry standards and that are performed by professionally and appropriately trained, responsive, and courteous customer service and maintenance staff. The Military Housing Office advocate told me they follow IMCOM, again, this falls under IICRC. There are five water damage technicians, one health and safety technician, and zero mold removal specialists with a 50 mile radius of Fort Polk. The closest mold removal specialist is 255 miles away in Frisco, TX, just outside of Plano. If IICRC practices were implemented, then I should be granted access to the contractor that performed the work. If IICRC professionals did not perform, nor inspect, the work, then the order is not satisfied under the MPHI Tenants Bill of Rights. I asked Corvias and Military Housing what the timeline was for the maintenance on my home and was given no specific answer. After my advocate stated that I have the right to a clear timeframe for maintenance and repairs to my home per entry 12, section B, of the MPHI Tenants Bill of Rights, I was told that I would have answers by next Friday, April 1, 2022. There was no effort made to ensure me that my situation was a priority or that they were going to do anything about our home. The military housing office advocate also informed me that I filled out and turned in the wrong dispute resolution forms, and provided me with the proper ones, even after guiding me to use the ones from the lease. After not responding to our email requests on Monday morning for 48 hours, asking her in person on Wednesday, another 48 hours transpired before she informed me that I had the wrong paperwork Friday afternoon. My informal dispute resolution process was delayed an entire week because of negligence. It felt to me that my displacement was nothing more than an inconvenience for them that they would get to when they felt like it. I do not accept that kind of treatment and will not be made out to seem ungrateful, nor problematic, for demanding the basic right of safe and habitable housing.

At the time of this testimony, Alyssa, Leo, and I are still displaced and living in an Airbnb 30 minutes from base. We are 100% out-of-pocket and waiting for a revision of our per diem offer that takes into consideration the entirety of our displacement. I would like clear, concise, consistently honest, and transparent communication with my property manager and housing office. I would like to feel that they are taking charge and not leaving the bulk of the work to me. I have a job to do; that job is to be a soldier in the United States Army. Their job is to provide safe housing and resolve disputes that arise with professionalism and courtesy. Alyssa has her own life, as do all of our service member's partners. They aren't bystanders and they deserve more recognition and respect from these organizations. They are the backbone of this country's backbone; a very important role that should not be taken lightly. Spouses deserve the world, and then some. As a soldier who is currently in the Immediate Response Force (IRF,) my unit is ready to mobilize and deploy within 18 hours to any place in the entire world. Should that

call come, I need to be absolutely certain that my family is safe and taken care of. As it stands today, my trust has been misplaced; I am not confident in the safety of my family, nor the safety of any other service member's family, until these standards are taken seriously and fully implemented. Lack of funding cannot continue to be the excuse; this reign of moral hazard must end. There needs to be accountability and transparency. We are willing to sacrifice everything for those that we love, so why won't these privatized housing companies sacrifice a bit of their ego to ensure the health and well-being of those who keep this country profitable for them? When will we place people before profits? How many children need to be born with special needs before you accept the problem? How many spouses need to get sick for you to hear our voices? We've been treated like second-class citizens in third-class housing for too long. Enough is enough.

Corvias and our garrison civilian housing advocate claim to follow IMCOM standards for maintenance and repairs. IICRC is the Army standard, which requires a certified individual to diagnose, treat, and determine the habitability of a home before, during, and after repairs have been made. My lease was signed on August 12, 2021, 11 days after the revised MPHI Tenants Bill of Rights was placed into effect. I challenge any excuse claiming that "implementation takes time." In U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM,) if uniform regulations or physical fitness standards are changed, there is a hard-date for effectiveness; no exceptions. If a soldier fails to meet or exceed those standards, they are held accountable, but if a housing company fails, who does the accountability fall on? For too long, privatized housing companies have operated with a sense of impunity, leaving countless families in the wake of their negligence. Every service member is sworn to protect and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. We uphold the framework of this democracy and serve as guardians of the American way of life. Each citizen of this country puts their faith and allegiance in us to uphold the standards that we hold dear. What do you do when the foundation that supports those protectors is built on mold, sewage, lead, pests, and lies? If we're as strong as our weakest and as fast as our slowest, how ready are we really if we're as healthy as our sickest? The Army's mission is to fight and win the Nation's wars, but what do you do when we're fighting to win the war on safe and habitable housing in this Nation? Readiness starts with a safe home.